

# LITTLE BITES AND SNACKS

*"Little whims" and "sudden cravings" are both phrases used to describe antojitos, the little bites and snacks in this chapter. These are the foods of the street—in Guadalajara, you can find flautas sold in the busy markets, while in Baja, you will find stands where chunks of fresh fish are being made into tacos. One seldom finds a street corner without someone selling food, as snacking is a characteristic way of eating in Mexico.*

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# FISH TACOS



## SALSA FRESCA

This chunky fresh salsa is the reigning condiment of Mexico.

It also goes by the names of *salsa mexicana* or *pico de gallo* in some regions. In a bowl, toss together 1 lb (500 g) ripe tomatoes, cut into ¼-inch (6-mm) pieces; ¼ cup (1½ oz/45 g) finely chopped white onion; ¼ cup (½ oz/10 g) loosely packed chopped fresh cilantro (fresh coriander); 3 serrano or jalapeño chiles, seeded (page 39) and finely chopped; and 2 teaspoons fresh lime juice. Season to taste with sea salt. Cover and let stand for 10–15 minutes to allow the flavors to mingle. Makes about 2 cups (16 fl oz/500 ml).

To make the batter, in a bowl, stir together the flour, garlic salt, and ground chile. Pour in the beer, whisking to make a smooth batter. Cover and let stand for up to 1 hour. Meanwhile, make the creamy salsa: In a small bowl, stir together the mayonnaise, ketchup, and yogurt until blended. Set aside. To make the tacos, remove the skin from the fish fillet if it is still intact and run your fingers over the fillet to check for and remove any embedded bones, using tweezers if necessary. Cut the fish into 8 strips, each 3–4 inches (7.5–10 cm) long and ¾ inch (2 cm) wide, and place in a nonaluminum bowl. Sprinkle with the lime juice, garlic salt, and ground chile and toss to mix. Let marinate at room temperature for 10 minutes. Pour the oil to a depth of 1 inch (2.5 cm) into a deep-frying pan and heat to 375°F (190°C) on a deep-frying thermometer (see Note, page 10). This may take up to 5 minutes.

Meanwhile, heat a *comal*, griddle, or heavy frying pan over medium heat. When it is hot, stack 2 or 3 tortillas on the heated surface and leave for a few seconds. Flip the tortillas, rotating them every second or so until all are hot. Wrap in a dry kitchen towel and repeat with the remaining tortillas. They should keep warm for 10 minutes. If they are to be held longer, wrap a damp towel around the dry towel and place the packet in a 200°F (95°C) oven.

Pat the fish strips dry with paper towels. One at a time, dip a strip into the batter, allowing the excess to drip off, and slip into the hot oil. Do not allow the pieces to touch. Fry until the strips are crisp and golden, about 7 minutes. Using a slotted spatula, transfer to paper towels to drain. When all are fried, transfer to a warmed serving plate. Put the *salsa fresca*, cabbage, and limes in separate small bowls and set on the table along with the fish, creamy salsa, tortillas, and hot-pepper sauce. Let the diners make their own tacos, wrapping the fish in a tortilla and adding the other items.

MAKES 8 TACOS. OR 4 SERVINGS

## FOR THE BATTER:

1 cup (5 oz/155 g)  
all-purpose (plain) flour

1 teaspoon garlic salt

½ teaspoon ground árbol  
chile (page 114) or cayenne  
pepper

1 cup (8 fl oz/250 ml) beer,  
preferably dark, or milk,  
at room temperature

## FOR THE CREAMY SALSA:

½ cup (3 fl oz/80 ml)  
mayonnaise

½ cup (3 oz/90 g) ketchup

½ cup (3 oz/90 g) plain  
yogurt

¾ lb (375 g) red snapper or  
sea bass fillet

1 teaspoon fresh lime juice

½ teaspoon garlic salt

¼ teaspoon ground árbol  
chile or cayenne pepper

Canola oil for deep-frying

8 white corn tortillas, about  
6 inches (15 cm) in diameter

Salsa Fresca (*far left*), finely  
shredded cabbage, 8 lime  
quarters, and bottled hot-  
pepper sauce for serving







# QUESADILLAS WITH POBLANO CHILES

## FOR THE TORTILLAS:

2 cups *masa harina*

1¼ cups (10 fl oz/310 ml)  
plus 2 tablespoons warm  
water

¼ teaspoon sea salt

## FOR THE FILLING:

1 tablespoon canola or  
safflower oil

1 white onion, thinly sliced

2 cloves garlic, finely  
chopped

½ teaspoon dried oregano,  
preferably Mexican

2 poblano chiles, roasted  
and seeded (page 106), then  
cut lengthwise into 12 strips  
each ¼ inch (6 mm) wide

½ teaspoon sea salt

½ lb (250 g) Muenster or  
Monterey jack cheese,  
shredded (about 2 cups)

12 fresh epazote leaves  
(optional)

Canola or safflower oil for  
deep-frying

Guacamole (page 10) for  
serving

Salsa Fresca (page 32) or  
Salsa Verde (page 111) for  
serving

To make the dough for the tortillas, in a bowl, mix the *masa harina* with the warm water. Using your hands, squish the flour and water together until a cohesive mass forms when pressed. The dough should be smooth and pliable. Cover the bowl with a barely damp kitchen towel and let stand for 5–10 minutes. Add the sea salt and knead gently in the bowl for 1 minute. Divide the dough into 12 equal portions and use your palms to form each portion into a ball. Cover with the damp towel. To make the filling, in a frying pan over medium heat, warm the oil. Add the onion and sauté until golden brown, about 5 minutes. Stir in the garlic and oregano and continue cooking for 1 minute. Add the chiles and sea salt and toss until everything is thoroughly heated. Taste and adjust the seasoning with sea salt.

To make the quesadillas, put 2 sheets of plastic cut from a plastic storage bag inside a tortilla press (page 115). Put a dough ball between the sheets and gently press down the top plate of the press. Remove the top piece of plastic and place a generous tablespoon of the shredded cheese on half of the tortilla, keeping the edges free. Top with 1 epazote leaf, if using, and a chile strip with a few onion slices. Lift the lower piece of plastic to fold the uncovered side of the tortilla over the filling. Press the edges together with your fingers, remove from the press, and set aside, covered with a barely damp towel. Repeat until all the quesadillas are made.

Preheat the oven to 200°F (95°C). Pour oil to a depth of 1 inch (2.5 cm) into a deep, heavy frying pan and place over medium-high heat until the oil shimmers. Fry the quesadillas, one at a time, until golden, 1–2 minutes. Using a slotted spatula, transfer to paper towels. Let drain briefly, then transfer to a heatproof platter and keep warm in the oven. Serve at once with the guacamole and salsa.

*Note: Quick quesadillas may be made with thin, purchased white corn tortillas, but they will not seal as well as homemade tortillas.*

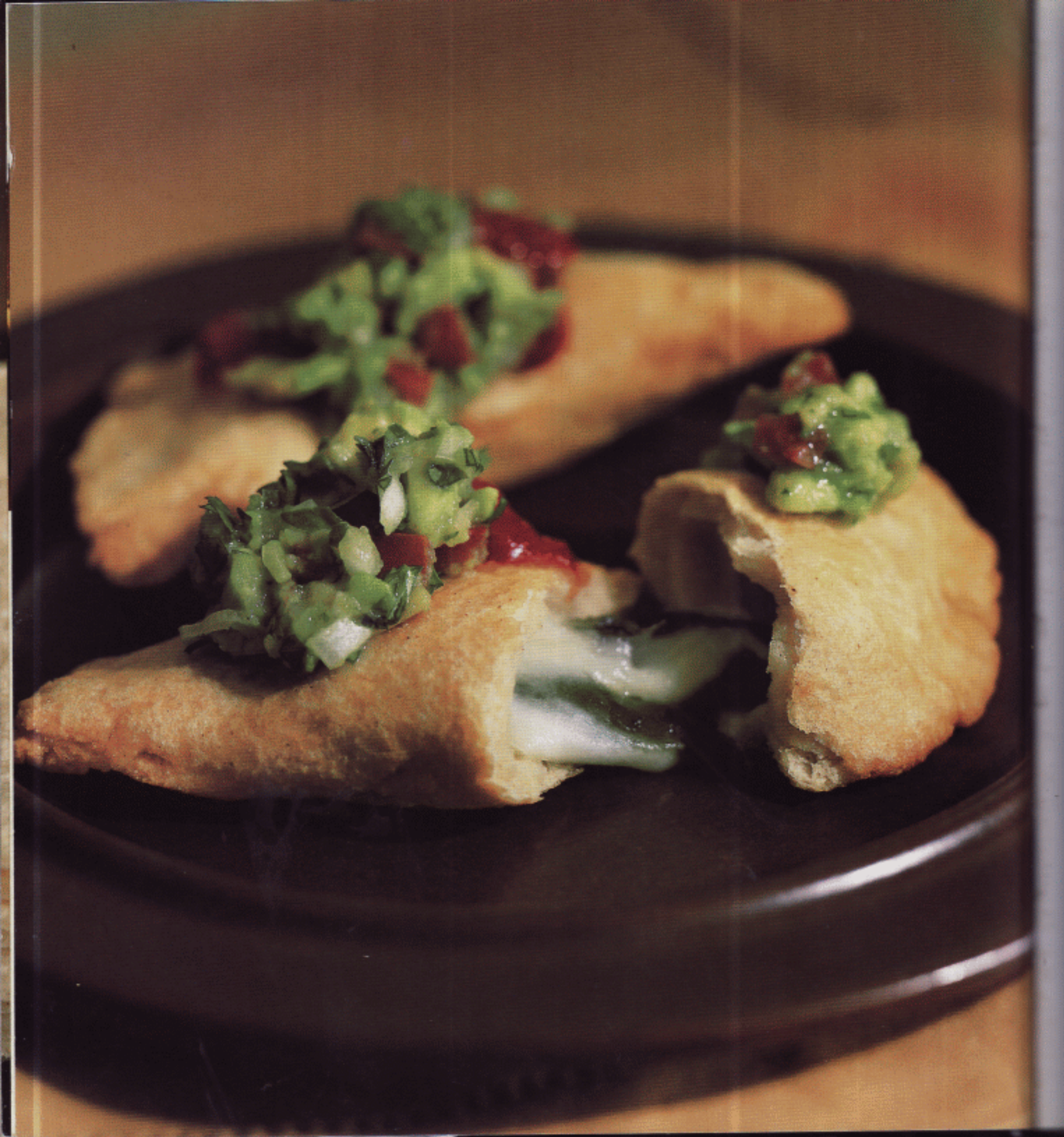
MAKES 12 QUESADILLAS, OR 6 SERVINGS



## MASA AND MASA HARINA

*Masa*, the dough used for making tortillas, tamales, and many *antojitos* (little bites) such as quesadillas, is the foundation of much of Mexican cooking. It is made by boiling dried corn kernels with slaked lime to remove their tough skins, and then grinding them to form the dough. If possible, use freshly ground *masa* from a local tortilla factory or other source—there is nothing like it. *Masa* can also be made from packaged *masa harina* (shown above), which is ground dried *masa*, but it will not have the same body or flavor as the freshly made dough.







# SHRIMP EMPANADITAS



## ABOUT EMPANADAS

Half-moon-shaped empanadas and *empanaditas*, their miniature look-alikes, are similar to the *pielike* pastries and turnovers of Spain and were baked in Mexico and Latin America as soon as the Spanish settlers began to grow wheat. The tender flour crusts may hold savory or sweet fillings. *Empanaditas* are ideal party fare because they can be made in advance and refrigerated overnight, or frozen for up to 2 months before baking. Bake frozen *empanaditas* in a preheated 350°F (180°C) oven until lightly browned, 20–30 minutes.

To make the filling, in a large frying pan over medium heat, warm the oil. Add the onion and garlic and sauté until soft but not browned, about 2 minutes. Add the tomatoes, bay leaves, and sea salt and pepper to taste, reduce the heat to medium-low, and continue to cook, stirring occasionally, until the mixture is dry, 10–15 minutes. Add the shrimp, chiles and pickling liquid, olives, and capers and stir until the shrimp are opaque and the mixture is dry, about 5 minutes. Remove from the heat, remove and discard the bay leaves, and set aside to cool for at least 30 minutes or, preferably, let cool completely, cover, and refrigerate overnight. Taste and adjust the seasoning with sea salt and pepper. The filling should be full flavored and highly seasoned.

To make the dough, in a bowl, using a large wooden spoon, beat together the butter and cream cheese until well blended. Stir in the flour and ½ teaspoon sea salt and mix well. Knead the dough just until it holds together and can be formed into a ball. Wrap with plastic wrap and refrigerate for 15 minutes.

Preheat the oven to 375°F (190°C). Lightly grease a baking sheet. On a lightly floured work surface, divide the dough in half. Roll out one half until it is ⅛ inch (3 mm) thick. Using a 3-inch (7.5-cm) biscuit or cookie cutter, cut out rounds. Place a heaping teaspoon of the filling in the center of each round, fold the round in half, and seal securely by pressing with your fingers. Use the tines of a fork to crimp the edges.

In a small bowl, beat the egg with ½ teaspoon water. Brush the tops of the half-moons with the egg mixture and place on the prepared baking sheet. Bake the *empanaditas* until lightly browned, about 15 minutes. Transfer to a wire rack and let cool for at least 5 minutes. Serve warm or at room temperature.

MAKES 30 EMPANADITAS

## FOR THE FILLING:

2 tablespoons canola or safflower oil

½ white onion, finely chopped

3 cloves garlic, minced

1½ lb (750 g) ripe tomatoes, peeled and finely chopped

2 bay leaves

Sea salt and freshly ground pepper

1 lb (500 g) shrimp (prawns), peeled and chopped into ¼-inch (6-mm) pieces

4 pickled jalapeño or serrano chiles, finely chopped, with 1 tablespoon pickling liquid

8 pimiento-stuffed green olives, chopped

12 capers, finely chopped

## FOR THE DOUGH:

1 cup (8 oz/250 g) unsalted butter, at room temperature

6 oz (185 g) low-fat cream cheese, at room temperature

2 cups (10 oz/315 g) unbleached all-purpose (plain) flour

Sea salt

1 large egg







# FLAUTAS WITH SHREDDED CHICKEN

1 tablespoon canola or safflower oil, plus oil for frying

½ white onion, finely chopped (about ¾ cup/4 oz/125 g)

3 serrano or jalapeño chiles, finely chopped

2 cloves garlic, minced

1 large, ripe tomato, finely chopped, or ½ cup (3 oz/90 g) drained canned diced tomato

2½ cups (15 oz/470 g) finely shredded poached chicken (page 113)

Sea salt

12 thin corn tortillas, about 6 inches (15 cm) in diameter

4 cups (8 oz/250 g) finely shredded romaine (cos) lettuce

1 teaspoon fresh lime juice

FOR THE GARNISHES:

½ cup (4 fl oz/125 ml) Salsa Verde (page 111), plus extra for serving (optional)

½ cup (4 fl oz/125 ml) crema (page 51), plus extra for serving (optional)

6 radishes, trimmed and sliced

In a frying pan over medium-high heat, warm the 1 tablespoon oil. Add the onion, chiles, and garlic and sauté until softened, about 2 minutes. Stir in the tomato and continue to cook, stirring constantly, until the mixture thickens and the color changes, about 3 minutes. Fold in the chicken, season to taste with sea salt, and heat thoroughly. Remove from the heat and set aside.

Place a heavy frying pan or a stove-top griddle over medium-high heat until hot. Lay a tortilla briefly on the hot surface to make it pliable. Transfer it to a flat work surface and arrange several tablespoons of the chicken filling across the lower third of the tortilla. Tightly roll the tortilla up into a tube to make a *flauta*, secure with a toothpick, and set aside. Repeat with the remaining tortillas.

In a bowl, toss the lettuce with the lime juice. Spread it out on a serving plate or on individual plates, dividing it evenly.

Pour oil to a depth of at least ¾ inch (2 cm) into a deep, heavy frying pan and heat over medium-high heat until the oil shimmers and registers 350°F (180°C) on a deep-frying thermometer. Add the *flautas*, 2 or 3 at a time, and fry until crisp and pale gold on all sides, about 4 minutes. Using a slotted spoon or tongs, transfer them to paper towels to drain. Keep warm in a low oven while frying the rest.

Place all the *flautas* on the lettuce on the platter, or arrange 2 or 3 *flautas* on each plate. Spoon the ½ cup salsa across the *flautas* in a ribbon, then top with the ½ cup crema and the radishes. Serve at once, accompanied with more salsa and crema, if desired.

*Make-Ahead Tip: The flautas can be filled up to 45 minutes in advance of frying, if wrapped in plastic wrap and kept at room temperature.*

MAKES 4-6 SERVINGS



## HANDLING FRESH CHILES

Chiles vary in pungency and in flavor. Capsaicin, the odorless, tasteless chemical responsible for the degree of “heat” in different chiles, is concentrated in the membranes that line the inside wall of the pod, with the seeds and the skin harboring a lesser dose by association. To reduce the fieriness of a chile, remove the seeds and membranes before using. Capsaicin, which is not water soluble, can cause pain if it comes into contact with eyes or other sensitive parts of the body. If possible, wear disposable gloves when handling chiles.







# SQUID AND SHRIMP TOSTADAS



## CLEANING SQUID

Many markets sell already-cleaned squid, but you can also clean them yourself: Pull the head and tentacles in one piece from the body. Cut the tentacles from the head just below the eyes, then discard the head. Squeeze the cut end of the tentacles to force out the hard beak. Pull the long, clear quill from the body and discard. Squeeze out the remaining material in the body. Cut off the fins and peel away the mottled gray membrane that covers the body, then rinse thoroughly inside and out and dry on paper towels. If squid are purchased already cleaned, just rinse them well.

Clean the squid if needed (*left*), and cut the squid bodies crosswise into rings  $\frac{1}{2}$  inch (12 mm) wide. Keep the tentacles together unless large; if large, cut in half vertically. In a saucepan over medium heat, bring 2 cups (16 fl oz/500 ml) water to a boil. Add 1 teaspoon sea salt and the squid and cook until just opaque, about 1 minute. Quickly rinse under very cold running water until cold. Drain and pat dry with paper towels. In a bowl, stir together the squid and onion, then stir in the orange juice and the  $\frac{1}{2}$  cup lime juice. Add the chiles and pickling liquid and the carrots and toss lightly. Stir in the olive oil and season to taste with sea salt and pepper. Cover and refrigerate for at least 2 hours or for up to 1 day to allow the flavors to blend.

Spread the tortillas in a single layer, cover with a heavy kitchen towel to prevent curling, and let dry for several hours. About 1 hour before serving, remove the squid mixture from the refrigerator, stir in the shrimp, and taste and adjust the seasoning. Let stand at room temperature while frying the tortillas.

Preheat the oven to 200°F (95°C). To fry the tortillas, pour oil to a depth of 1 inch (2.5 cm) into a heavy, deep frying pan and heat to 375°F (190°C) on a deep-frying thermometer (see Note, page 10). Add the tortillas one at a time and fry until crisp, about 20 seconds. Using tongs and a slotted spatula, transfer to paper towels to drain, then place on a heatproof plate or tray in the oven. Repeat until all the tortillas are fried.

Just before serving, drain off all the liquid from the squid mixture. In a bowl, using a pestle or fork, mash the avocado flesh with the  $\frac{1}{8}$  teaspoon lime juice and a sprinkle of sea salt, forming a slightly lumpy paste. Coat each tostada with some of the avocado mixture. Add a thin layer of lettuce and top with the seafood mixture. Garnish with the cilantro leaves and eat out of hand.

MAKES 6 MAIN-COURSE OR 12 APPETIZER SERVINGS

1½ lb (750 g) small cleaned squid, or 2½ lb (1.25 kg) uncleaned squid

Sea salt and freshly ground pepper

$\frac{1}{2}$  small red onion, finely chopped

1 cup (8 fl oz/250 ml) fresh orange juice

$\frac{1}{2}$  cup (4 fl oz/125 ml) fresh lime juice, plus  $\frac{1}{8}$  teaspoon

3 pickled jalapeño chiles, sliced into thin rings, with 2 tablespoons pickling liquid

6 pickled carrots (packed in the jar with the pickled chiles), sliced into thin rings

$\frac{1}{2}$  cup (4 fl oz/125 ml) extra-virgin olive oil

12 corn tortillas, the thinnest possible, about 6 inches (15 cm) in diameter

6 oz (185 g) cooked small shrimp, chopped if desired

Canola or safflower oil for frying

1 ripe Hass avocado, pitted and peeled (page 10)

2 cups (4 oz/125 g) finely shredded iceberg lettuce

Leaves from 6 fresh cilantro (fresh coriander) sprigs



